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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that compared the social-adjustment levels of students who participated in a middle-school transition program with students who did not. The program, implemented at Whitewater Middle School in Fayette County, Georgia, was designed to ease elementary students into the middle school system. In the Shadow Program, fifth-graders accompanied, or "shadowed," sixth-graders for one school day, to familiarize themselves with the middle-school surroundings and schedule. A total of 108 fifth-grade students participated in the study--54 program participants and 54 nonparticipants. A social-adjustment instrument was administered to the students when they reached grade 6. Teachers completed a survey to assess their perceptions of program effectiveness. Faculty expressed overwhelmingly support for the program. Findings indicate that students who participated in the Shadow program were socially better adjusted than those who did not participate. Students in the experimental group reported having lower anxiety levels and fewer problems finding needed facilities. It is recommended that middle-school teachers place the affective domain of students as their highest priority. (LMI)

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THE EFFECT OF THE SHADOW TRANSITION PROGRAM ON THE SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF WHITEWATER MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to compare the social adjustment levels of students who participated in the Whitewater Shadow transition program with students who did not. A secondary purpose was to collect data regarding teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of the Shadow transition program.

The subjects who took part in this study were 108 sixth grade students and staff from Whitewater Middle School in Fayette County, Georgia. Half of the students participated in the Shadow transition program while they were in the 5th grade, and half did not. Students in the control and experimental groups were matched based on gender, achievement level, and age.

The authors developed an attitudinal instrument to measure students' social adjustment levels. The test-retest reliability correlation for the instrument was $r = .94$. Staff perceptions of the effectiveness of the transition program were collected through use of a survey.

A t-test for dependent groups determined (t-score = 2.97, $p < .01$) that the difference in the social adjustment scores between the control group and the experimental group was statistically significant. The staff members' perceptions were overwhelmingly supportive of the Shadow program.

The authors concluded that students who participated in the Shadow transition program were better adjusted socially than those students who did not participate. These students had lower anxiety levels and fewer problems finding lockers, bathrooms, the right bus, the right hallway, etc. The authors suggested that the Shadow transition program or similar type programs be expanded to other middle schools.

INTRODUCTION

The adolescent years are critical in the development of the individual, and nowhere is this more evident than in the middle school years. Youths are searching for their own identity and often exhibit their independence through a rebellious attitude. This is reflected in dress, behavior, and reliance on peer groups instead of the adults in their lives. However, few of these youths are ready to become independent.

The adolescent needs a safe and caring educational environment where mistakes can be made without harmful results. To balance these needs, the middle school years should be experienced in an environment with very strong but elastic walls, with caring adults who provide direction without rigidity. This experience should begin with an orientation or transition program for those elementary students who will be promoted to middle school the following year.

At Whitewater Middle School in Fayette County, Georgia, future sixth graders are provided with a transition program that is thought to be successful in easing students from the elementary school into the middle school program. The Shadow Program, as it is called, allows fifth grade students to "shadow" sixth graders for an entire school day .

Purpose of the Study

Scheduling difficulties at Whitewater Middle School in the Spring of 1993 resulted in some students participating in the Shadow transition program while others did not. This created a natural setting to investigate the possibility of a difference in the social adjustment levels of those students who participated in the Shadow program and those who did not. The purpose of this study was to compare the social adjustment of the sixth graders who did participate in Whitewater Middle School's Shadow transition program in the Spring of 1993,

with that of those who did not participate in the transition program. A secondary purpose was to determine the teaching staff's perception of the effectiveness of the transition program.

Justification for the Study

It was thought that the adjustment from elementary school to middle school would be easier for those students who go through the Shadow transition program. If this study provides data to support this premise, then this or similar transition programs should be expanded to other middle schools.

The unique developmental period of middle grades' students sets the stage for future success in school, and consequently in life as an adult. Because subsequent achievement hinges on past successes, it is imperative to provide as many opportunities as possible for success. This research investigates one attempt to ensure that their careers as middle school students start successfully within a safe and caring environment.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A great deal of research has been devoted to middle schools. Consequently, the review of the literature will be selective and only address the following topics: the special needs of middle school students, the need for transition programs, and components of a successful transition program.

Special Needs of Middle School Students

Johnston and Markle (1986) used a clinical scientific approach to studying the middle school. In their research, they concluded that even if a middle school student has acceptable academic performance, a negative attitude toward school will exhibit itself in avoidance of

functions associated with that environment. Continuing, they stated that students' initial reaction to positive reinforcers may become intrinsic with time. They claimed that positive reinforcement as well as modeling and operant learning theory can be useful in developing positive attitudes in middle school students. Other studies discussed negative motivation. If a person does not fit into his or her environment, negative motivational consequences develop (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, MacIver, & Feldlaufer, 1993).

Many researchers speak to other needs of the middle school student. Hertzog (1992) used changes in the family and other institutions as a basis for addressing the affective side of students. He stated that affective needs must be met before genuine learning can occur. According to Sierer & Winfield (1988), pre- and early adolescents were far more confused and anxious, less secure, and less integrated than older students.

Stress in adolescents has been researched by Bruene et al. (1985), who compiled a list of five major tasks facing new middle school students. They were the following:

(1) managing the changes in role definitions and expectations;

(2) managing shifts in social support networks and group membership;

(3) reorganizing personal social support resources;

(4) reappraising oneself and one's life situation; and

(5) managing stress related to uncertain expectations, goals and abilities.

More specific concerns were addressed by Gardner and Carpenter (1985). They conducted a major study of students, parents, and educators. Students cited the following as needs requiring adjustment: novel routines, a new organization of the school, and new academic,

social and personal challenges. Predominate in their findings was individual adjustment to the new setting. They compiled data from six groups: sixth grade students, parents of sixth grade students, parents of fifth grade students, teachers of grades five and six, and middle school counselors. All groups responded that transition needs are important and indicated that the school system must address these needs.

In the study by Weldy (1991), students identified very real and practical concerns related to the transition from elementary to middle school: getting to class on time, finding lockers, keeping up with school materials, finding restrooms and lunchrooms, catching the correct bus home, dealing with crowded halls, and remembering their class schedules.

The Need for Transition Programs

The above review of specific concerns of new middle school students documents a necessity for transition programs for students prior to entering middle school. This necessity is further demonstrated by the following statement:

> Because of its unique function as the bridging school in education below the college level, the middle school must be especially concerned with identifying and employing the best means possible to articulate (that is, join, unite, connect) the schools that precede and follow. (Alexander & McEwin 1989, p. 9.)

Weldy (1991) stated that a change in school levels is one of the major transition points in life. He said "Schools across the country can attest to the fact that students making these transitions from one level of schooling to another experience a range of emotions from mild uncertainty and frustration to major anxiety and academic failure" (p. 1). Epstein & MacIver

(1990) that transitions are "both difficult and exciting as they mark points of risk and opportunity for student development" (p. 44). They asserted that children and parents need to be better informed about school programs, requirements, procedures, and opportunities, as well as students' and parents' responsibilities.

In a three year study in Austin, Texas, Paredes (1990) found that scores on achievement tests were affected by the transition to the middle school regardless of the year of transition. Sixth grade students in a K-6 setting did better than 6th graders in a 6-8 setting (year of transition). The students in the K-6 setting did worse on entering a middle school as 7th graders (year of transition) than the 7th graders who entered the middle school the year before. He concluded that special attention was needed to assist students in making the necessary social and cognitive transitions from elementary schools to middle schools.

Components of a Successful Transition Program

In 1988, at the Johns Hopkins Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools, Epstein and MacIver (1990) conducted a national survey of principals at two thousand four hundred (2,400) public middle schools. Their data showed that the most common transition activities used by middle school principals were elementary school students visiting the middle school (53%); middle grade teachers and elementary administrators meeting on articulation and programs (46%); and middle grade counselors meeting with elementary school counselors (44%). They also reported that the principals who delayed transition activities until the fall considered their programs weak. They concluded that "well-implemented articulation practices to ease the transition of students from elementary to middle grade schools reduce the number of

students who are retained to repeat the grade of transition" (p. 68). In a later study by Epstein and Herrick (1991), parents and students responded more positively if they felt welcomed and more informed after visitations.

Appropriate strong transition practices are also discussed in other research literature. Benander (1982) studied a poor Massachusetts Appalachian area where severe winters, poverty, and intense local pride that resulted in poor academic achievement and misbehavior as students moved from elementary schools to middle school. He discovered that when students were warmly received, they were more capable of success.

Based on the literature, it would appear that the following transition practices are the most successful: visiting the middle school classes for a full day; involving parents; having older students act as buddies or partners; visitations and open houses in spring and August; assignment to "family" or "house" groups; and continued follow-through (Bloomer, 1986; Haptonstall, 1993; Hertzog, 1992; Lake, 1988; and MacIver and Epstein, 1993).

The literature cited here supports the need for strong transition programs. The stronger programs appear to have the following two major components: (1) a practical knowledge base so students are familiar with the new environment, and (2) an affective domain in which students feel safe and are warmly received and welcomed.

The Shadow program at Whitewater Middle School contains these two components and others mentioned as important for transition programs. Consequently it was hypothesized that the following would occur:

#1

the social adjustment levels of students who participated in the Whitewater Shadow transition program would be significantly better than those of students who did not participate, and

#2

teacher perceptions would be supportive of the effectiveness of the Shadow transition program.

Definition of Terms

Transition practices - Practices planned specifically for the introduction and familiarization of elementary students to the middle school environment.

Middle school - A school that exists between elementary school and high school. Grades six through eight is the customary organizational pattern for middle schools but other grades are often represented.

Social adjustment - How well a student handles problems typical of students entering the middle school as reported on a survey instrument.

Staff's perception of effectiveness - the opinions of staff members about the Shadow program as reported on a survey instrument.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The subjects who took part in this study were 108 students in the sixth grade at Whitewater Middle School in Fayette County, Georgia. Fifty-four of the students who did not take part in the Whitewater Shadow program as fifth graders were matched with 54 students who did take part. The school is three years old, and its population is mostly middle to upper-middle class students. The majority of the students are white with the second largest group being Afro-American. A large number of the population is well-traveled and have lived in many parts of the world as nearby Peachtree City, Georgia, is a bedroom community for business executives and airline employees.

Thirty-seven staff members participated in the study. The staff consisted of fifteen regular sixth-grade classroom teachers, fourteen "other" staff, and eight exploratory teachers.

Instrumentation

An attitudinal instrument was developed to measure the social adjustment of the students. The instrument was a survey using a Likert scale which allowed choices from strongly disagree to strongly agree on a five point scale. Students who agreed with the items on the survey were categorized as having better social adjustment than those who disagreed. Students who "strongly agreed" with an item got a score of five, "agree" had a score of four, "neither" had a score of three, "disagree" had a score of two, and "strongly disagree" had a score of one. The opposite values (reverse scores) were assigned if disagreement with an item indicated social adjustment. The instrument allowed for comments at the end.

There were eighteen items on the survey, three of which were on age, school attended, and gender. The remaining 15 items were selected based on input provided by counselors, principals, and teachers regarding their perceptions of the kinds of problems students typically have on entering the middle school. Scan-Tron Survey Form 20S-WS was used for student responses. The instrument was tested and post-tested for reliability with non-survey students. This resulted in a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.944.

The staff survey was designed by the researchers to collect data on staff perceptions and their evaluation of the Shadow Program. The survey consisted of 21 items with the same format as the student survey. Seven of the items asked the staff to make comparisons between students who participated in the Shadow Program and those who did not participate. For example, "Are less anxious when they begin sixth grade." Nine items asked for evaluative-type responses on the Shadow Program. For example, "The Shadow program allows teachers and other staff to make students aware of expectations." The remaining three items were attitudinal in nature and required a "yes" or "no" response. For example, "If you were a parent, would you want your middle school student to experience a program similar to the Shadow program." Reliability data was not collected on this instrument because the information was intended to be descriptive only.

Procedures

Each year over 300 fifth grade students from the elementary schools are invited to spend the day at Whitewater Middle School. Each fifth grade student is paired with a sixth grade student to "shadow" for a day. Only two students per day are added to each middle school classroom. Counselors and principals from the middle school ride the bus with the elementary

students to the middle school. Elementary staff do not accompany the students.

The day begins with a brief meeting during which the fifth grader meets the sixth grader. An orientation booklet which includes a list of middle school terms, keys to success from sixth graders, interview sheets to use, and other items of interest to a new student is given to the fifth grader . The day ends with the counselors and "shadows" processing the visit and evaluating the program.

One-hundred-and-eight sixth grade students were selected to determine the affects of the Shadow Program. Half of the students were from three elementary feeder schools and had participated in the Whitewater Middle School Shadow Program at the end of their fifth grade school year. The other half were from Fayetteville Elementary School. Due to a scheduling conflict at Fayetteville Elementary School during the spring of 1993, these fifty-four fifth grade students were unable to participate in the Shadow Program. Instead they came for a tour which lasted about an hour.

Each group of fifty-four students was matched on the basis of sex, Iowa Tests of Basic Skills scores, and age. Age was kept within six months, and Iowa Test of Basic skills (ITBS) scores were within eight points, with most falling within four points. Additionally, students in special programs, such as special education and gifted, were matched with similar students.

The student survey was administered by the researcher during the Advisor/Advisee periods in groups of about 20 students. The survey was explained to students, and instructions were read aloud. Assistance was provided for those needing it. Students were allowed to write on the survey if it was easier for them to use than the Scan-Tron form provided. The responses

were then transferred to a Scan-Tron form by the researcher. Students who were absent were surveyed during a later Advisor/Advisee period.

Method of Analysis

A total score was tallied for each student. When analyzing the surveys, the choices of "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" were assigned the appropriate values. An average score was determined for each item on the student survey by dividing the total points by fifteen--the number of items on the survey. Scores were entered for matched pairs as correlated raw data. A "t" test for correlated or dependent groups was used as the statistical test of significance (quantitative analysis). Comments from participants were used in the subjective analysis (qualitative analysis).

The measure of teacher perceptions was the classroom and exploratory teachers' responses. They were analyzed using descriptive procedures such as percentages and frequencies.

RESULTS

The research data on the Whitewater Middle School Shadow Program consisted of student and staff survey data and comments. The group of students who participated in the regular Shadow Program are identified as Group O for "Other Schools," and the students from Fayetteville Elementary School who did not take part in the program are identified as Group F.

Student Survey Data

The social adjustment score for Group O was 41.67, and for Group F it was 38.25. A t-test of the raw data resulted in a t-score of 2.967 ($p = .0045$). **Hypothesis # 1, which stated**

that the social adjustment levels of students who participated in the Whitewater Shadow transition program would be significantly better than those of students who did not participate, was supported.

In order to gain a better understanding of the differences in social adjustment between the two groups, an item analysis was conducted. There was very little difference in the responses of Group F and Group O students on five (5) of the items. These items dealt with having trouble getting on the bus to go home; whether or not they enjoyed their first day at middle school more than the first day of elementary school; whether or not they were confused during the first week of school; whether or not they had difficulty learning to use a locker; and having a headache on the first day of school.

Group F had higher social adjustment scores than did Group O on three items. On the item, **"I could find my way around the building,"** Group F had a 64% agree response compared to 53% for Group O. On the item, **"afraid of older students,"** Group O had a 31% agree response which compared to a 20% agree response for Group F. On the third item, **"I had no problems in the lunchroom the first week,"** Group F had an 81% agree response compared to 75% for Group O.

Stronger social adjustment scores for Group O were found on six items. On the item **"I felt comfortable in my first period class,"** Group O was 65% in agreement with the statement while only 41% of the Group F students agreed with this statement. The next item, **"I was scared when we changed classes,"** was designed to get a gut feeling response of students the first week of school. Forty-three (80%) of the fifty-four students in Group O said they disagreed

with this statement. Only twenty-nine of the Group F students (54%) disagreed with this item.

Forty-two per cent of the Group O students reported that they were not very anxious after the first day, which compared to 36% of the Group F students. On the item dealing with **"could not find the media center,"** 11% more of Group F than Group O students agreed that they couldn't. Similarly, 13% more Group F than Group O students disagreed with **"I could find my P.E. and exploratory classes on day one".**

The researchers found the largest range of differences in scores on **"Visiting Whitewater in the spring helped me know what teachers expected of me."** Nine students of Group O disagreed with this statement compared to 26 in Group F. Group O had 39 students who agreed with this statement compared to 20 Group F students who agreed. This means that a total of 72% of Group O agreed that they knew what teachers expected of them, whereas only 27% of Group F knew what teachers expected of them.

Staff Survey Data

The staff survey was first analyzed for total scores. Sixteen of the items on the staff survey were stated in such a way that Strongly Agree and Agree choices showed a positive response to Whitewater Middle School Shadow Program. Of these sixteen items, thirteen (81%) of the items received positive responses.

The three remaining items, which did not receive a positive response, were: **"Have less problems in their lockers; have less conflict with other students; and have fewer bus problems."** It is important to note that the number of positive responses exceeded the negative. However, on these items, the number of staff who stated that neither transition group was

superior to the other negated an overall positive response.

Several items which dealt with observable emotional behavior resulted in 73% (regular teachers) and 60% (exploratory teachers) of the staff agreeing that there were less problems with students who had participated in the Shadow Program. These items were as follows: **"Are less anxious when they begin the sixth grade,"** and **"Show less emotional distress: crying, observable behavior."**

Five (5) items had scores of 80% or more in the Strongly Agree or Agree categories. The behaviors measured dealt with locating places; being aware of expectations; having first day jitters; the tone of decorum; feeling a part of the school; and whether or not the program is helpful to students.

Four items had between 89% to 100% agreement that the Shadow program was effective in the following areas: allows teachers and other staff to make sixth grade students aware of expectations; eliminates first day jitters; helps students feel like they are a part of the school; and provides general knowledge of the physical environment.

The scores were compared for exploratory teachers, classroom teachers, and other staff to see if there were any differences in perceptions about the effectiveness of the Shadow program. On the item **"is worth the extra work and time because it makes the first week easier for teachers,"** only one regular teacher disagreed, while 50% of the exploratory teachers disagreed. On the **"is helpful to students,"** 100% of the regular teachers agreed, but only 50% of the exploratory teachers agreed with that statement.

Of all three staff groups, the exploratory group had the most responses in the disagree area. Of one-hundred-fifty-two possible responses, thirty-two (21%) of the exploratory responses fell into disagree categories. Ten of a possible two-hundred-twenty-eight responses (4%) of the twelve regular teachers fell into the disagree categories.

One hundred per cent of the classroom teachers indicated on item nineteen that other middle schools should adopt a similar program, which compared to 50% of the exploratory teachers. However, when asked on item 20 if they would want their child to experience a similar program, only one disagreed.

Based on the above it appears that there is overwhelming support for hypothesis # 2: Teachers are supportive of the Shadow transition program.

A review of the comments by students revealed that they exhibited practical and very personal concerns dealing with such things as the following: using lockers, finding bathrooms, showering, busing, negotiating crowded hallways, and remembering schedules. In Group O, forty percent, and in Group F, forty-six percent, indicated that they were anxious by comments such as the following: "In the first week everything was confusing. The most confusing things were getting to all of the classes, orientations, busses and getting my locker open." The transition to middle school is not accomplished without some emotional turmoil and social adjustment.

DISCUSSION

Statistical support for the effectiveness of the Shadow program in helping students with their social adjustment and transition into the middle school environment is certainly encouraging. While the data supported the effectiveness of the Shadow program in most areas, there were some areas where this as not the case. Group F scored higher on the social adjustment scale when responding to "was afraid of older students." They also scored higher on "finding my way around the building." It is possible that Group F had a higher percentage of siblings at Whitewater Middle School, or more friends. The following comments from Group F students suggest that to be the case. "When I visited Whitewater Middle School my cousin went to this school and I knew most of her friends and they showed me around a little bit." Another student said, "When I was a fifth grader and visited Whitewater, we did not get to see much. I did not know where the 6th grade hall was, but my sister on the first day showed me where it was. My sister showed me where everything was, that I needed to know."

Another factor may be that more of the Group F community activities such as church and recreation and sport leagues occur in the Whitewater Middle School facilities. This was verified by past observation by the researchers, and by calendars of building use.

Lunchroom problems also seem to occur more for Other School students than for Fayetteville Elementary Students. Since Group O experienced a lunch period as part of the Shadow Program, and Group F did not, this lends itself to further inquiry as to why there is an eleven percent difference in group responses. Perhaps the cafeteria at Group F's school was more like the middle school environment. Structurally, this is true, but the serving lines are not that

different in any of the schools.

On all other items there was clear support for the Shadow program improving the social adjustment of students. The program was clearly more effective in some areas than in others. For example, the area of teacher expectations was one of the strongest features of the Whitewater Middle School Shadow Program, and one that had previously been given little importance. Both teachers and students overwhelmingly agreed that students who participated in the Shadow program knew what was expected from teachers, while those who did not participate were not aware of teacher expectations. The researchers believe that this item is very important to middle-school students and that it is a priority item for students and teachers alike. Students who know what is expected tend to perform to the expectation and are more successful than those who do not know what is expected.

Data that was very supportive of the Shadow program concerned the behavior "I was scared when we changed classes." Almost half of the students who did not participate in the Shadow program agreed with this statement, which compared to 20% for those students who did participate. Certainly, fear is a limiting factor in a learning environment. It is not easy to focus on learning when fear controls your emotions. Biologically, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the brain to function properly when the emotions are in control.

Somewhat of a surprise were the data received from the exploratory teachers. They tended to be less supportive of the Shadow program than the regular classroom teachers. The authors theorize that this lack of support is the result of a greater disruption when fifth grade students were in their classes "shadowing" a sixth grader's schedule. Exploratory teachers in

subjects such as foreign languages, shop, home economics, etc., may only have students for 6-9 weeks, whereas the regular teachers have the same students all year. This could create more control problems for exploratory teachers and result in less support for the Shadow program. Despite this tendency to be less supportive, all of the exploratory teachers but one indicated that if they had a child, they would want him/her to be part of the Shadow program.

There is one other clear argument for the Shadow program for those school districts where elementary schools have schedules which are markedly different from that of the middle school the students will enter. Elementary students from large elementary schools where students change classes for some subjects seem to have better social adjustment than those students which come from small elementary schools where they are more self-contained. This opinion is based on the previous experience of one of the authors (Bulach) as a school superintendent in three different school districts. Based on his experience, it takes students from smaller and often rural elementary schools from 2-3 months longer to adjust to the new educational setting of a large middle school. The Shadow program should be even more beneficial for this type of student.

One of the limitations of this study was a lack of information from parents about the Shadow Program. What students say at home to their parents may be more indicative of students' social adjustment. There was some parental support for the program as reported by the media specialist in her comments, e.g., "I've heard more feedback from parents than students. They say that it is a great idea and worth everything we put into it. The parents really feel we try to help the students, and them with the Shadow Program. It helps the kids to get a feel for what

middle school is like. It is definitely good 'P.R.' with parents!" There appears to be parental support for the program, but this was not verified.

CONCLUSIONS

The authors concluded that the affective domain should be the highest priority for middle school teachers. Students need to believe and feel that they are going to receive a "just and caring" education in an environment that is challenging, secure, and safe. They further concluded that a successful transition program is where and when this emphasis should begin. If the transition practices are successful, the students' social adjustment will be enhanced. Educators, the community, and parents must work together to see that students experience positive school and peer interaction. It seems logical that the most sensible place to begin building this positive climate would be with the transition program. This should be seen as an opportunity to break down the animosity of different culture groups and reform identities linked with the receiving schools.

Overwhelmingly, researchers and authors reiterate the importance of the transition/orientation process in ensuring success in middle schools. This concept was clearly illustrated by the middle school principals' indication that effective articulation practices resulted in lower retention rates for the involved classes (Epstein and MacIver, 1988). Whitewater's Shadow Transition Program contains what researchers say are strong transition practices. This research verified that the program provides for greater social adjustment for students who participated in the program. Further, staff's perceptions are that the program is effective, and they are supportive of it. Additionally, Whitewater administrators were in strong agreement that

it lessened their problems with youngsters.

The results of this research support the need for expansion of transition programs such as the Shadow program. Middle school students are at the very threshold of adulthood. How adulthood is approached and the impressions made along the journey to maturity can determine the success or failure of the individual. Experience and research tell us that success begets success. If students find success in school, they will have a greater chance of becoming productive citizens as adults. Productive and socially adjusted adults should be the ultimate goal of education.

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